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ABSTRACT

An untapped resource of the inner city is the ethnic pluralism of many of its students. Field trips to old, often historic, parts of the city can be used to enhance student knowledge about family life in both their own and other ethnic groups. This kind of environmental education can lead to positive outcomes for the student including: (1) pride in his family heritage; (2) awareness of the diverse backgrounds of Americans; (3) respect for other cultures; and (4) excitement in the learning process. In addition, parents can become involved with the school, home cultural values can be reinforced and school personnel can develop an understanding of the environment in which the students live. (PR)

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"MULTI-ETHNIC FAMILIES: A TREASURE OF THE INNER CITY"

Marilyn M. Hart

It has been fashionable in the 70's to construct an acronym to describe an educational program. The United States Office of Education catalog entitled "Educational Programs That Work" has synopses of exemplary programs developed by local school districts and is replete with acronyms. ALOHA is for "Allowing Learners Optimum Human Attainment", INSTRUCT is for "Instructional System for Teaching Reading Using Continuous-Process Technology", and HIT means "High Intensity Tutoring."[1] When I tried to fit combinations of the first letters of my most cogent points into an acronym, they sounded either like a sneeze or a dirty word - therefore, no acronym - just a plea for using what already exists in all of education - the family.

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A bit of explanation for the word "treasure" in my title. There has been a plethora of articles, speeches, symposia, etc. on the "problems", "learning deficits", and "cultural deprivation" of low-income inner-city children. Prestigious journals have carried arguments supporting either the functional or structural viewpoints of the "culture of poverty".[2] But we <u>all</u> have problems, we <u>all</u> have learning deficits and we <u>all</u> are most certainly culturally deprived. If you disagree with that assumption, please name the most popular food in Afghanistan - oh, by the way, in the language Pushto, please. Can't? You see, you've got a problem - in

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addition, you are linguistically deficient and culturally deprived ! The word "treasure" does connote something that must be searched for or discovered; treasures do not usually appear on our doorsteps. Yet a frequently untapped treasure or resource of the inner city is the ethnic pluralism of many of its students.

Many teachers over the years have invited representatives of ethnic groups to assemblies or classroom demonstrations, but these guests were usually strangers. One of the questions of the Multiethnic Education Program Evaluation Checklist in "Curriculum Guidelines for Multiethnic Education,"[3] a publication of the National Council for The Social Studies, is "Does the curriculum examine the experiences of ethnic group people instead of focusing exclusively on the 'heroes' ?" Think for a moment of the implications of that question. How exciting to have Carlo's mother tell about the customs of the island where she was born, or Dave's grandfather spin a yarn about working on the Pulaski Skyway.[4] Even the poorest of homes economically is rich in experiences.

Since the heart of the inner city is usually the oldest and most historic part of the county, field trips can always enhance a history lesson. In an old section of Elizabeth, New Jersey, there stands a small bronze statue of a Minuteman from the Revolutionary War. Yet hundreds of students in that area had no knowledge of its significance until a church

tutoring program used it in a lesson on the Revolution. But, why not field trips to homes ? Museums can sometimes be quite sterile places, where many items are necessarily behind glass, with guards standing around. (I can hear some teachers saying, "Sure, but what home will invite my twenty-six students?") True, but not all twenty-six might even be interested in the same home visit. A cooperative school administrator can arrange for part of a class to visit; schedules should not be carved in stone. Speaking of stone, one little old lady (with no children in school) once invited me to bring some children to see her "rock collection". We went. Collection was an understatement ! Her entire dining room was filled with shelves; she even had lights over the ones displayed in the china closets, which she opened and took specimens from for the children to hold. It was by far the best private collection in the county and represented a hobby which had occupied the woman's free time for over fifty years. No lesson on rocks or minerals in the classroom could have generated the interest and enthusiasm of that field trip. Similar experiences can be designed to incorporate the family of a member of the Polish Marching Band, or to visit a Cuban or Italian delicatessen.

An excellent parallel to using the ethnicity of the family to teach diverse cultures, traditions, foods, clothing, religious beliefs, etc. is "The Yellow Pages of Learning Resources" by The

Group for Environmental Education Inc.[5] It is a publication that is concerned with using the city as a learning resource. Typical subjects are: What Can You Learn from a cemetery?... from a pharmacist?...from a taxicab driver? Its focus is on using people, places and processes as learning resources. Dependent upon your particular city environment, you could do the same thing with the ethnic background of your students- whether they be third generation Irish, first generation Portugese, or fifth generation African.[6]

If you were able to implement, even to a small degree, this sort of enriched curriculum, expanding on the heritage of the students in your class, what benefits would accrue?

--- From the students' viewpoint:

* Pride in the family heritage is developed. (Grandma really <u>does</u> know something !)
* Awareness of the diverse backgrounds that combine to form the American political system.
* Respect for each other's individual culture.
* Excitement in the learning process.

--- From the parents' viewpoint:

* Closer communication with the school.
* Satisfaction in being able to contribute to the educational process. (This is especially important for those parents with little formal education or for transient families)
* Reinforcement of cultural values or customs that so frequently can be lost from one generation to another.

--- From the school's viewpoint:

* Establishment of new bridges of support from the community and reinforcement of old ones.

* Expansion of opportunities for learning.

* Understanding of the day-to-day environment in which the students live.

Sometimes one reads of a "melting pot" theory of enculturation in the United States, particularly with reference to the public school system. That would be a disaster. An alternative once referred to long ago by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen on his television program from New York City and one that is applicable in most inner-city areas today is the "mosaic" of enculturation. In a mosaic, each tile is distinctive, retains its identity, yet is part of the whole and really contributes to make the picture complete. The picture is not complete if we neglect those treasures sitting right in our classrooms.

MOSAIC ? An acronym ? Multiethnic Opportunities_ _ _ _ ?

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REFERENCES

[1]Educational Programs That Work, United States Office of Education, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. (by the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, San Francisco, California.) Fall, 1976.

[2]for a comprehensive discussion of the "culture of poverty concept, see Eleanor Burke Leacock, The Culture of Poverty: A Critique, New York City: Simon & Schuster, 1971.

[3]Curriculum Guidelines for Multiethnic Education, a position paper, publication of the National Council for The Social Studies, 1515 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, Virginia, 1976.

[4]part of U. S. Highway No. 1 in northern New Jersey. Named for Count Pulaski, a Polish hero who lost his life fighting for the colonies in the Revolutionary War in the United States.

[5]Yellow Pages of Learning Resources, ed. Richard Wurman, Group for Environmental Education, Inc. 1214 Arch Street, Philadelphia, Pa. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1973.

[6]a barber shop in a black-populated seetion of a city used to keep books on Black History around for its customers' browsing, because at the time the schools were making no mention of the Blacks' contributions to history.